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ABSTRACT

The author reports on an investigation of the variations in total verbal output and in verbal variety noted from interview responses of eighteen persons, each involved with a specific issue or topic at one of three levels. He defines the levels as: (1) observer, or someone who is aware of the issue but passive about it; (2) participant, or one who actively engaged in work for or advocacy of the issue; and (3) coordinator, who not only advocates or works for the issue, but also enlists and coordinates the activities of others. All subjects responded to the same questions and were allowed as much time as they wanted to respond. The interviews were transcribed and the content analyzed on a word-by-word basis. The author reports that the results revealed a geometric increase in total verbal output and in verbal variety as commitment increases. He also discusses his analysis of items such as types of words used and functions of certain words for each of the levels, and he points out some of the clear differences among the semantic qualities of the most often used words elicited from subjects at the three levels of commitment. (RN)

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Communication Correlates of Commitment

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One of the recurrent criticisms of experimental research in Speech Communication is that it rarely looks at speech behavior. Instead, critics say, researchers spend most of their time exploring attitude development, group cohesiveness, and so forth. This kind of criticism prompted the research reported here. I began this study of the relationship between commitment and communication behavior by looking for a measuring device which would focus on active and overt communication activity instead of pencil paper measurement of attitudes or some other non-communication variable. What I discovered was that, for the most part, overt verbal actions are usually studied in the position of the independent variable in speech research. Our research looks at the verbal actions of communicators as the causes of certain effects --- cohesiveness, leadership emergence, attitude change and so forth. Rarely do we look at this kind overt communication as being the effect of some other cause. I suspect that the reason that we haven't done much research along these lines is that it is difficult --- far more difficult than the utilization of a semantic differential or a Likert Scale. Conducting an analysis of the verbal output of 100 subjects is time consuming, yet this kind of analysis is precisely what our communication and rhetorical theories call for; for example, a good deal of important rhetorical research and theory suggests that symbolic behavior, particularly language behavior, is inherently ego involved ---

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if the communicator is involved with what he talks about, his language output will reveal it. The works of Kenneth Burke, Hugh Duncan, Richard Weaver, Suzanne Langer, I.A. Richards and others all suggest that the human use of symbols is instinctual and highly ego involved and that thus language use reflects beliefs and attitudes not only conceptually --- by what language says --- but also metaphorically --- by how it says. This belief has recently been substantiated from the communication perspective also. R. G. Bales, working with small groups and the sociology of group behavior, has observed that the artistic use of symbols, particularly in the fantasy theme, is highly significant as a factor in the development of norms. The metaphor of the fantasy encapsulates belief, attitude, and social reality in <u>how</u> it says as opposed to what it says (e.g., groups may "act out" the use of profanity in order to justify repeated use of profanity as a group norm). Some physical maladies also seem to be related to language use it seems. If a person uses gastro-intestinal symbols to talk about his reality (e.g., "I can't stomach it"), he is more likely to develop ulcers than someone using a different metaphor. Most of the self persuasion research done in our field is predicated on the assumption that by engaging in symbolic behavior counter to one's own belief, attitudes will be altered.

The study reported here was an attempt to focus on both of these trends --- the criticism of the traditional input-output experiment and the growing interest in the relation between symbolic behavior and ego involvement. In attempting to design a study which would meet both of these focal points, I looked for a measuring device which did not involve pencil and paper testing, and I searched for an independent-type variable which would be related to individual belief and attitude. Commitment, as a variable,

seemed to have been studied frequently and findings consistently point to the importance of commitment on subsequent belief or attitude as well as an important result of some treatment. Not only does commitment cause change, but it also reflects it. In terms of measurement, one reliable and consistently revealing measure of verbal outputs, variety, and total activity. Thus, this study looked at the total verbal output and the variety of that output as it reflected levels of individual commitment.

Procedures

Three levels of commitment were defined for this study. They might be thought of as weak, moderate and strong levels of commitment:

1. The observer level of commitment --- a subject in this classification was aware of a particular issue, had read or heard about it, but was not involved further in the issue.
2. The participant was actively involved in a particular issue. He might demonstrate about it, write letters about it or actively canvass for some aspect of it.
3. The coordinator not only participated himself in the activities surrounding a particular issue but coordinated and directed the activities of others often recruiting participants.

An interview format was designed and pilot tested and then used to elicit extended responses from 18 subjects --- 6 from each level of commitment. Six issues were involved: voter registration in college towns, woman's liberation, a tuition increase, the governor's budget which had drastic higher education cuts, a movement to save an arboreteum from being cut down to make room for a building, and a new grading system. In each of these issues, it was a relatively simple matter to find individuals representing each of the levels defined above. For example, in terms of the voter

registration issue, the observer was a student who had not yet registered but who was aware of the issue; the participant was a canvasser who went door to door prior to the 1970 elections to encourage persons who were not registered to get registered; and the coordinator was the Democratic county chairman who organized the voter registration drive in the county and who recruited canvassers and deputy registrars. Each of these persons was interviewed using the pilot-tested interview. Interviews were conducted by the same individual in all cases, and the interviews were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed.

RESULTS

The transcribed interviews were analyzed by computer using as measures total amount of verbal output, the variety of that output (how many different words were used --- in a sense how much the interviewee could elaborate on his statements) and the type token ratio of different words to total words. The results also allowed the researcher to observe what the relative use and favored position was for particular words (e.g., which words were most --- or --- least used by each group and how large the usage was for a particular word). The next step was to search for a pattern in this data.

TOTAL VERBAL OUTPUT

The 6 Observers had a total verbal output of about 1,000 words while the Participants produced a total of 4,400 total words thus more than quadrupling the total of the Observers in response to the same questions asked by the same interviewer on the same topic. This trend of increasing total verbal output as involvement or commitment increased was repeated

with coordinators. They produced nearly 9,000 total words in response to the same questions or about double that of the participants and eight times that of the observers. As commitment increases, verbal output increases perhaps due to the increased knowledge of the issue or to a need to express oneself about issues to which symbolic commitment has been made.

VERBAL VARIETY

The Observers use about 300 different words in their interviews; the Participants used about 900 different words nearly tripling the total output of the observers, and coordinators used about 1,700 different words thereby more than doubling the variety of participants and producing nearly six times the variety of the observers. Again there is a relationship between ability to elaborate or artistically discuss an issue and commitment.

TYPE-TOKEN RATIOS

One would expect that the ratio between different words and total words would decrease as total word output increased (as you use more words, you are forced to repeat some, thereby reducing variety in relation to total output). Supposedly the ratio ought to stabilize with numbers like those for Participants and Coordinators. This is not the case here. (The 3:1 ratio for Observers decreases as predicted to a 5:1 ratio in the Participants and to a 5:1 ratio in Coordinators. However, when these ratios are corrected using a formula suggested by J.B. Carroll (Language and Thought --- Prentice Hall, 1964) the prediction boomerangs. The

numerical expression for the observer type token ratio becomes 7.02 while for the participants it becomes 9.27 and for the coordinators it becomes 4.06). Instead of a consistent reduction, there is a hump in the curve tracing type-token relations --- Participants are less able to vary symbols than would be expected and coordinators are more able to vary symbols than would be expected. Perhaps the physical involvement reduces one's perspective and limited response to a reporting of one's own participation, thereby limiting the words likely to be chosen by participants, while coordinators can discuss the issue from a variety or perspectives and hence increase their options for verbal variety.

WORD PREFERENCE

There were some differences in the ways in which the three groups used different words. One might expect that observers would have to rely on the use of the personal pronoun "I" more than the coordinators but less than the participants. Yet the pronoun "I" accounts for .04% of total words for Observers, for .02% of total words for Coordinators but for .35% of total words for Participants. Since Participants are verbalizing their own experience, this is not surprising, but it is interesting to note that type of commitment is related to use of the personal pronoun "I". The pronoun "we" one would expect would be preferred by Coordinators who talk about a corporate involvement be definition. This expectation is not substantiated by the data. Coordinators and observers use the collective pronoun with about the same frequency. Participants use the pronoun "we" about half as often as either Observers

or Coordinators. Again the preoccupation with his own experience may reduce use of collective references by Participants. There are almost endless ways in which one might further explore particular words in a study like this, and the researcher is forced to make choices. One made in this study was to look at relative ranking of particular being verbs, the reason for this choice was that the forms of the verb "to be" usually are more definite and express a state of existence instead of a particular action or a particular expectancy. Though the total use of forms of the verb "to be" does not vary from group to group, the following differences in particular word preference are noteworthy:

1. The word "Don't" is ranked 16th and 25th by observers and participants but it is ranked 69th by coordinators. It represents about 1% of the total words used by participants and observers but only 1/5th of 1% of the total words for coordinators. They may be interested in "do's" not in "don't". They may also talk about things which should be done due to their overall perspective and may thus use phrases like "should do".
2. The word "is" represents about 2% of total words for participants and coordinators but only half as much for observers. Perhaps observers do not express definite relationships --- this state of affairs "is" so and so.
3. The word "It's" represents about 2% of total words for observers but only 1/2 of 1% of total words for participants and 1/4th of 1% for coordinators.
4. Observers do not use the word "will" which is ranked 40th and

43rd by participants and coordinators.

CONCLUSION

This study had two purposes; one, to attempt to quantitatively verify the suggestions by theorists in symbolic behavior like Langer, Burke, Weaver, and Duncan; and two, to try to use communication behavior as an output variable instead of as an input variable.

At least in terms of verbal variety and total verbal activity, it seems clear that the predictions of the theorists hold true --- symbolic activity is related to involvement in the issue under consideration, though the same relationship may not hold true in terms of type-token ratios between variety and total output. There are several interesting differences in particular word preference.

Methodologically, the use of word counts is not particularly revealing, if this study is any indication, but by using total output and variety as base measures, one can make a prediction that other differences may also exist between communicators. I suspect, having looked at the transcripts of the interviews that important differences do exist. Researchers in speech need to examine these kinds of differences by first looking at verbal output of communicators and then vis a vis some organizational scheme (e.g., the Toulmin system of argument analysis might be used asking which level of commitment produces the most warrants? data? claims? What kinds of warrants, data, claims are produced by communicators having different commitment levels, etc.). Nonetheless, initial word output

and word variety measures may signal researchers that differences do exist. This type of research is of course more difficult and time consuming than attitude change studies, but the results are probably more predictive and certainly relate more centrally to the focus and training of speech communication researchers.